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ABSTRACT

While tutoring on a one-to-one basis is not in and of itself a magic way to teach, it can realize many potential benefits. The tutor must learn to operate effectively in at least three roles: as coach, as commentator, and as counselor. As a coach, a tutor is a trainer, an encouraging helper who tells learners what they need to know in order to become more skilled. Also, the tutor as coach remains on the sidelines diagnosing what is not working effectively, what is going wrong, and how to improve, while not doing the work for the learner. The tutor/coach needs two sets of strategies: strategies for helping students learn what they could not learn from the textbooks and strategies for remaining silent at times. As a commentator, the tutor evaluates the whole situation and gives a larger perspective to the student. As a counselor, the tutor must consider the student as a whole person, offer advice, be aware of outside interference that may be hindering the learning process, search for ways to establish a successful working relationship, start at the learners' stage of development, and look for clues as to sources of error beyond the surface manifestation of what is on the page. (TJ)

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The Tutor as Coach, Commentator, and Counselor

Recently, while browsing through a fairly impressive looking book about teaching methods, I found an interesting chapter on tutoring. The book I'm referring to entitled The Psychology of Teaching Methods, edited by N. L. Gage and published in 1976 as the 75th yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. In the rather lengthy chapter on tutoring, written by Douglas Ellson, was a warning most properly directed at many of us here, myself included, who think that tutoring is not just the best or the only real form of teaching, but that everything else is merely an administrative convenience, a perverse watering down of that idyllic setting which perches the teacher at one end of the log and the student at the other.

As Ellson states, there is a widespread belief that individualized instruction, especially in the one-to-one teaching situation, is almost infallibly effective. However, as he goes on to show, objective research does not support this; it is an unjustified belief. The tutoring situation does not automatically improve the knowledge, attitude, self-concept, or motivation of the student being tutored. In the studies he cites (and there are enough of them to be convincing), there is no statistically significant evidence which proves that tutoring, as a teaching method, has any effect, beneficial or otherwise. To quote Ellson: "The significant variable in producing effective tutoring is the tutoring program--what tutors do. There is no magic in individual attention."

Because "individual attention," in an era of mass production and the supermarket approach, does have an aura of seeming so right, Ellson's statements should be as clear a warning as we need here that the one-to-one situation does not guarantee instant academic nirvana, that put into a tutorial situation the learner will automatically reach a state of total illumination, that the basic writer will never again, after some tutoring, write a fragment or a disjointed

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paragraph. In short, as tutors we have to think very carefully about what we do in order to do it well.

In fact, it's even trickier than the classroom where at any moment, someone out there may be getting something out of what you're saying, even if the other 25 or 30 aren't. In the tutorial, lose one person and you've lost the ballgame. By that I mean not only that your audience is limited to one person, but that (to keep shifting the metaphor) you are also the "court of last resort." If the student does not learn what he or she needs to learn from you, you cannot refer him or her back to the classroom for supplementary instruction.

But, despite these hazards, I also ought to add that done well, tutoring is a superb teaching method which has potential benefits that have not been fully explored. For example, beyond what can be achieved by the learner through tutorial instruction, Ellson cites some studies involving tutors in a reading program who were mostly underachieving high school students. The gains in reading skills by the tutors were far greater than those for a control group, thereby confirming the old adage about learning a subject by teaching it. (If you are searching for additional proof of the beneficial effect of tutoring on tutors, you might note the summary of 15 different studies in Sophie Bloom's Peer and Cross Age Tutoring (NIE, 1976). In 66% of these studies there were significant gains in achievement, interest in the subject, self-concept, and attitude toward school.) That we learn by teaching is, I think, a truism we can all vouch for from our own experience, and the potential for using tutoring as a teaching tool really is exciting, though it is not my subject for today.

From a different perspective, there is also another advantage of tutoring that Ellson demonstrates. When tutors are drawn from the ranks of non-professionals (translation: paid less), tutoring is an extraordinarily cost effective approach in terms of saving extra remediation. In fact, his figures should bring an eager gleam to the eyes of those tightwad administrators and budget-keepers who control

our destinies--because tutoring programs can save money.

But, I want to talk here not about whether or why tutoring is effective, but how a tutor tutors well. And I would like to do this by offering a few suggestions. These suggestions, I should add, have been won the hard way: first, by doing some post mortems on my own mistakes as I tutor in our Writing Lab at Purdue; and second, by eavesdropping on the other tutors in our lab. These tutors are all graduate students in the English department, most of them working on advanced degrees in composition which means that while I mispent my grad student days reading R. S. Sylvester on Sir Thomas More or William Nelson on Spencer, they spend their time reading Mina Shaughnessy, Janet Emig, Roger Garrison, Winterowd, Kinneavy, etc. I mention this because I want to prove to you that I've been doing some classy eavesdropping! From all this, I've chosen a few of the roles the tutor plays while tutoring: the coach, the commentator, and the counsellor. And, I might add, part of the success--and the exhaustion one feels from tutoring is the need to change hats in mid-sentence.

First, let's think about the tutor as coach. There are numerous similarities here to the sports coach that I could point out, but they are rather obvious and don't need any elaboration by me. The coach, of course, is the trainer, the encouraging helper who tells the learner what he nedds to know in order to become more skilled and what exercises he needs to work on in order to improve. Less obvious, though, is where the coach stands during all this--namely, at the sidelines. He can diagnose what's not working effectively, what's going wrong, and how to improve, but he does not do the work for the learner. He does not run the ten laps for the basketball player whose legs are too weak, i.e., (and I really cannot stress this enough, particularly since it is one of my deficiencies), the greatest activity is not on the coach's part. In the tutoring situation it is so easy for the tutor to begin talking and simply not stop, to go on and on lecturing to a passive listener, to assume control of the situation, to think for the student,

and even, unwittingly, to give the student the answers the student should have been searching out. I consider this a crucial point because people who are drawn to tutoring are usually those who find it rewarding to help the next person. Thus we have to fight a natural inclination to rush in and provide all the help we can, and it is so easy to fall prey to thinking that we are helping students when we provide the answers.

For example, the student who is having difficulties developing his topic doesn't need us to give him suggestions for material. Instead, he needs to learn ways to develop ideas. He should leave the writing lab not just with a mental or written outline or list of suggestions for what to write for one particular assignment, but also with some techniques, heuristics, or whatever you choose to call them for finding future material for future writing. Similarly, the student who comes to a tutoring session with a disorganized paper doesn't benefit in any permanent way from our having shown him how to reorganize that paper. He needs also to carry away some strategies or techniques for spotting lack of organization and for doing his own reorganizing. In short, he needs help in learning how to do it himself.

This means that the tutor needs to learn not merely the subject matter in order to deliver it--a lecturer can do that, but that, in addition, the tutor needs to acquire two different sets of strategies. One set is to be passed on to the student, for example, some heuristics to help invent material or perhaps some proofreading techniques to check for adequate punctuation. In addition, the tutor also needs to learn some techniques to use himself in order to help students learn what they couldn't learn from their textbooks, lectures, or classrooms. To do this, I have a few techniques to suggest. The first one is fairly simple to grasp, but hard to do, and that is to learn when and how to shut up, to insert pauses, moments of silence into the tutorial. We in English are a talky bunch; we love words; we can spew them out endlessly. None or very few of us could really be described as

"taciturn." Thus we are prone to so much talk that we don't give the student sufficient opportunity to interrupt and ask questions--or even a moment of quiet to think about what's been said or to answer a question just posed.

Which brings me to a second suggested technique, which is to act slightly stupid. That is, a good tutor when raising a question ought to inject a note that he too is looking for an answer and is inviting the student's help. What I am suggesting, is any way that you can create this, is to be sure that you've initiated real inquiry. When you ask a question, it should be clear that this is not a verbal test or quiz in which you want to see if the student knows what you know. It's the difference between asking:

"Does the apostrophe belong there?"

/translation: You ignorant fool, don't you know whether or not it does?/

and

"Does the apostrophe belong there?"

/translation: Hummm, I'm not exactly sure either. What do you think?/

This suggests that the prime requisite for the tutor is not necessarily total command of the subject matter. This also suggests another reason why peer tutors are successful. I suspect that because students perceive a fellow student as less threatening, they are more likely to search for answers that please themselves and not the tutor. For those of us too far over the hill to ever be mistaken as a fellow student, it is necessary to keep searching for techniques to assure the student, particularly the remedial student, that he is among friends.

But, having suggested that the tutor as coach needs to insert sufficient amounts of silence to allow the student to think a moment and also needs to ask questions which really do get the student involved in searching for answers, in order to get

the student to do much of the work, I am also going to suggest another role of the tutor is that of the commentator. And this requires a kind of expertise which is slightly different. Again, an analogy comes to mind which draws on the world of sports, and that is the sports commentator. He not only tells us what is happening, but evaluates the whole situation and gives us a larger perspective. His comments help us to draw back and get the "big picture." Translating this into the tutorial situation, I am suggesting that as the student and tutor work through to answers, the tutor should let the student know when he's on the right track and when he's taking a wrong turn into something less fruitful or less productive. Thus, a tutor is a commentator in the sense that he explains, illustrates, evaluates, or--most important of all--draws a larger picture of what's happening that the student could not otherwise see. In short, the tutor-commentator provides perspective, makes connections to larger issues, gives the student a sense of when they are moving forward and how, wraps up a session by helping a student to summarize what's been done.

Rather than bore you with a lengthy list of examples of what I mean, I'll take one situation to illustrate its potential for injecting various types of commentary. Let's assume that you are a tutor working with a student on punctuation, specifically the use of the comma. Even more specifically, you and the student are confronting a long sentence which, as written by the student, has no internal punctuation, but needs some. Depending on what went on before in the tutorial, it might be the time to broaden the perspective and spend a moment discussing punctuation not as a set of rules which please English teachers, but as a device to pace the reader through the sentence. While that is a matter of getting back to the "big picture" of what you're working on, the student might respond to the sentence by indicating that it needs something, but she doesn't know what. Perhaps this is the time to be the evaluator, to point out to her that she's progressed to the point of seeing the need for punctuation--which is a necessary forward step in the process of learning to use punctuation. Perhaps it's the time to remind her of

how to go about figuring which punctuation mark is needed and where. Suppose the student has added in too many commas. While helping her to see what's wrong, the tutor ought to comment to the student that whereas she was batting zero before, she's now up to 60%, or whatever.

What I am trying to emphasize here is that the learner needs to know when he or she is progressing, and this kind of perspective--or running commentary, is one job of the tutor. Another kind of perspective the tutor provides is at the beginning of the session or series of meetings. Let the student see what lies ahead, what he'll be working on and what the goal is. Enroute, some indication of how he is progressing is equally useful, as is letting the student know how well he's mastered the subject. While I am obviously skirting rather close to the education people's love of "sets of objectives," I do find it useful not only to keep the tutorial session on track, but also to help the student see how he is faring in the somewhat amorphous setting of the tutorial. In addition, I am suggesting that we give students feedback on the less obvious signs of learning to write more effectively.

Now, having said that like a coach, the tutor needs to be at the sidelines while the student does a good portion of the work; and like a commentator, the tutor also needs to keep evaluating and putting things into perspective, I'll add on one more job of the tutor. And that is, like a counselor, to look at the student as a whole person, to offer advice, to be aware of outside interference which may be hindering the learning process, to search for ways to establish a successful working relationship, to start where the learner is, to look for clues as to sources of error beyond the surface manifestation of what is on the page. Since it took me 5 or 6 pages of small print in a journal article to discuss this, I can't use up the time of the rest of the panel to deal with this in the depth to which I think it deserves. But I do feel the need to remind ourselves that in looking at the page of writing, we have to be as concerned with the writer and all

of his or her human complexity as we are with the writing in order to think about ways to bring about improvement in that writing. This means that we should not assume that the obvious causes of the error or deficiency are the real causes, that we should not assume that the student really cares to learn just because he or she is sitting there, that we should not assume that what worked for one student will automatically work for the next one. (It usually doesn't.)

Looking at the whole student and not just his or her verb endings means looking into or suggesting different modes of learning, switching tactics when one method or strategy isn't working, dealing with attitude, motivation, and sometimes even conflicting interests, even offering reinforcement on a bad day not because it's been earned, but just because it's needed. I could go on and on, but I think you have already anticipated my point. In fact, I also suspect that you've anticipated the larger message I've tried to deliver here, that the tutor who tutors well should take advantage of all the flexibility and interaction that cannot be achieved in the large group situation of the classroom.

Having said that, I think I'll take a bit of my own advice--which is to stop lecturing and to shut up, in order to listen to any questions or comments you may have.

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